

the world smells of war

by kathleenfergie

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Summary: She is not your mother. Wanherda pulled you out of a dying woman and was merciful enough not to throw you out into the snow. You still call her mama in your weak moments and she does not fight it, but the two of you will never be close. (au canon divergence future fic)

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Wanherda's voice calls out across the courtyard, beckoning you, and you give a small goodbye to the group of soldiers that has gathered around your fire. As you enter the mouth of the dropship, you see her wipe fresh blood off her stained hands.

"Help me with preparations," she commands softly, swiping the back of one hand across her brow. You follow her to the body, a young boy with a torn open abdomen, and assist her in readying him for preservation. The gravedigger won't be back for another week yet and the boy will have to rest underground until then. Wanherda closes his blank eyes and sighs, tucking a strand of blonde hair behind her ear.

"Shall I go tell the others?" You ask after all is done and there is only silence left in the room.

"No, I'll take care of that. Head up to bed and get the fire going, please." She gives you a small, halfhearted smile before heading out into the night. You turn away from her and bless the boy - \_yu gonplei ste odon\_ whispered into his ear - before climbing up to the second floor.

You set a small fire for the night, moving the social cushions away from it for safety. You throw a couple onto Wanherda's bed before sinking down on your own, the soft furs and woven blankets welcoming after a long day. There was a skirmish on the east end of Trikru territory and the wounded had been brought to the encampment, the two

of you in surgery for most of the day.

In the distance, the great gate closes and there is a peppering of voices. You hear Wanheda slosh water over fires before coming inside and closing the dropship door. Her boots clang against the metal ladder and you watch her blonde head bob into sight, the tired healer practically crawling her way to bed. She blows out the array of candles that surround her area and removes her clothing, humming to herself.

Her tattoos have always been unique, not quite belonging to any specific clan or territory, and you trace them with your eyes. When you were small, she used to let you climb all over her and run your chubby fingers over the raised skin. There is a large piece on her back that she calls the Ark, several constellations, different flowers, and a small ink replica of the Commander's crown. On her arm is the brand of the twelve clans next to an intricate Azgedan pattern.

"\_Reshop\_," she yawns, settling in.

"\_Reshop\_, mother," you mumble into your pillow.

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><p>There is a Trikru boy that you like far too much and have to stop yourself from smiling like an idiot anytime you open the gate in the morning to find his tanned face waiting. You cannot leave camp without Wanheda's immunity and so he comes to you without complaint, trailing flowers and berries. Sometimes, if he is feeling bold, he presents skinned rabbits to Wanheda and you watch him shake as she appraises them.</p>

He lives in a village just minutes away and tells you about it, all the houses and gathering places. You dream about the small patch of forget-me-nots that he says sits outside his front door. You have only traveled through it once, years ago, and hope that Wanheda will take you again soon; she's due for a healing campaign.

The dropship territory is neutral, but sits in the middle of Trikru, and not every clan feels safe traveling through the great woods to find Wanheda's camp. It is rare that she goes on campaigns, but you have been on two before and long to see the other clans again. Even as a small one you were learning to stitch up cuts and apply pressure to wounds, but now you have as much skill as your mentor.

She is not your mother, she says. Wanheda pulled you out of a dying woman and was merciful enough not to throw you out into the snow, is all she will ever say. You still call her mama in your weak moments and she does not fight it, but the two of you will never be close.

Wanheda may claim not to love you, but you remember a winter where you suffered from a fever so great you couldn't walk. The memory of Wanheda's large body wrapped around yours to keep you warm is imprinted into your mind and you visit it often. She'd told stories and sang folk songs for days, cooling your forehead with a cloth and icemelt. You found out weeks later that she hadn't opened the gate for anyone while you were ill.

So, she is not your mother and does not love you, but she is everything you have and you admire her.

Sometimes, soldiers tell you about her triumphs from when she came down from the sky, and they sound like fairytales. Gathered around the fire with Skaikru's strong moonshine wetting their tongues, the warriors take turns boasting about the last Heda and her accomplishments. Her influence rests inside the current Commander, but he is not as strong as she had been. Wancheda leaves whenever Heda Lexa is mentioned, sighing to herself.

Heda Aden has visited Wancheda several times, his party causing more noise among the trees than usual. He's been the Commander since before you were born and the years show on his face, creases forming around his mouth. You and your Trikru boy spy from bushes and dream about what Polis looks like, the eternal flame spoke of everywhere. Heda stays on the third floor of the dropship so that he can have a view of the forest and his footsteps keep you up at night.

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><p>Wancheda only smiles for the harbinger, and even then it is a muted expression.</p>

She comes with her husband and handful of gorgeous children, pressing kisses to Wancheda's face and beaming. When you were six, Octavia of both the sky and the trees carried you through the dark night without Wancheda's permission. You were wrapped in a blanket and a patchwork doll warmed your side as fluorescent blue butterflies kissed your cheeks. You have dreamed of that night for many years and miss the way she used to coddle you.

She treats you like a warrior now, greeting you with a kind smile before grasping one forearm. She squeezes her other hand on your bicep and rolls her eyes.

"Clarke better be feeding you more than nuts, kiddo," she drawls, eyeing Wancheda.

It delights you when Skaikru come through because you get to hear your mother's name spoken aloud. Below your bed, under your mattress, is a crude marking that reads her name, scratched in years ago. People do not use that name anymore because of Wancheda, and so you scarcely hear it. For some reason, it warms you, to think that this legend of a woman is human, too.

"She's dating that hunter's son, Octavia," Wancheda points out, making her way toward the dropship with a toddler hanging off her arm. "I've sacks of preserved meat to last me past winter."

You blush slightly and Lincoln laughs at you softly. You have always liked him.

He likes to sit in the infirmary and watch you heal, Wancheda guiding you. His quiet presence is comforting and he has a habit of humming without realizing it, adding soft tunes to the sterile surgery. At the end of the day, there is always a child scrambling in, breathless and crying for their father. He wears his Apollo smile as he carries them out, bouncing them on his shoulders.

You have asked Wanheda about your mother, but she was half frozen and hemorrhaging by the time she'd reached the dropship. Wanheda hadn't had time to find out her name before she died and there you were, red and squawling.

Wanheda draws all the patients who pass and keeps them in a box by her bed. There is one marked with your birthday and the charcoal image of your birth mother reminds you of the books in Arkadia that have pictures of Renaissance angels. The rich curve of her cheek was captivating and you want to think she had red hair, like Venus.

You remember being a toddler and babbling stories to Wanheda about the charcoal people who lived in a box.

The harbinger is never without sour news and you are shut out of the dropship for three hours with the children before the adults emerge. Wanheda has that look in her eye and you sigh, picking at the grass. Lincoln whistles and calls his children to him, scooping up all three in his arms, carrying them off toward the horses while Octavia talks sternly to Wanheda.

The women kiss goodbye and embrace each other for a drawn out moment, Wanheda sighing as Octavia descends from the dropship. The warrior comes up to you and smiles weakly, reaching for your arm. You grasp hers and shake it, giving your aunt a hard look.

"I won't see you until after the winter," she tells you, still holding onto your arm. "I've got another bun cooking in my oven and the elders predict a harsh season. You keep Clarke alive until then, alright?"

You nod and she winks at you, leaning forward to press a kiss to your forehead. Octavia squeezes your arm once more and backs away before turning to her family. Lincoln whispers into his wife's hair before mounting his horse, two boys in front of him. Octavia loops one arm around the third child and calls a goodbye, trotting away.

There are few Trikru gathered in the courtyard, but they all let out a sigh as the harbinger leaves. Octavia may be one of them, but no one trusts the thirteenth clan these days.

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><p>What is left of Farm Station attacks the village and kills your boy. His father brings his mangled, bullet-riddled body in through the gate and Wanheda has to pause her tasking to catch you as you fall to the ground. You cannot even cry out, your voice caught in your lungs. His battered and bleeding brothers file in behind their father and attempt to keep in their anguish.</p>

Wanheda heals the victims of the attack first before dealing with the dead and it is nighttime before you can feel anything in your body again, torchlight flickering against your knuckles. You'd already cut off a lock of his hair and stuffed it into one pocket, shoving tears off your cheeks with a violent palm.

When the gate finally closes, your mother kneels before where you sit, grass staining her knees.

She doesn't say anything, she never does, only reaches out a hand and

runs her thumbs over the skin of your wrists.

She pulls you off the ground and leads you into the dropship, practically pushing you up the ladder. You purposely keep your gaze narrow, too afraid to see his body wrapped in muslin. Collapsing onto your furs, you let out a harrowed sob, gasping into the heap of pillows. Wanheda shuffles around, lighting a fire and snuffing out candles. She pulls the blanket out from under your body and drapes it over you, adding an extra layer after that.

"His fight is over, my love," she says in a comforting tone and you shake your head in disbelief. "The gravedigger comes in the morning; Bellamy will lay him to rest, I promise. His clan's warriors and Heda will reap blood for him."

You sob again, sinking further into your bed. Wanheda sighs heavily before lifting the blankets and crawling in beside you. She smooths your hair down and wipes a weighted thumb across your cheeks. You have always disagreed with the traditional saying, but in that moment, \_jus drein jus daun\_ is all that fires your insides.

"\_Wamplei kom skai kru\_," you grit out, sucking tears back in through your teeth. The sound echoes harshly against metal. "Farm Station should burn."

\* \* \*

><p>Everytime that you find yourself watching the gravedigger, memories of his death surface.</p>

It is not Bellamy's fault, gods no, but each day morning that he walks through the gate, his face drowns you in sorrow. You used to like him, but now he brings more sadness than the harbinger. Wanheda watches him enter the courtyard from the mouth of the dropship, jaw locked and eyes harsh.

You help him lead his horse to an open tree, tying the beast and pulling a handful of oats from your pocket, letting it eat them from your palm.

"How has the winter been so far?" He asks, tucking curls behind his ears. You study the cluster of freckles that has sprouted on his cheek since the last time he came and forget to answer. He humms when he catches you staring and clicks his tongue, shoving hands into pockets and stalking his way to the dropship.

You have often wondered how a blind man can know one place so well and then you remember that this dropship birthed him onto the earth all those years ago. You imagine he carries maps in the lines on his face, leading him back to his original camp.

He is quiet, yet fierce, and you can never tell what he ia feeling from one moment to the next. It is easier around Wanheda, but he is a puzzling man nonetheless. His role in the dismemberment of Skaikru and the war against Heda Lexa cost him his eyes, and still they are the most expressive part of his face.

You met the woman who did it when you were eight, Indra. She'd been the most intimidating and mesmerizing warrior you had ever

encountered.

Bellamy Blake comes to bury the dead, hours spent digging crude rectangles deep into the cold earth and lowering bodies to the next life. You sat in the dirt as you watched him bury your boy, months ago.

Wanheda confuses you, too, when the gravedigger comes. She is soft for once, staring blankly at the gravedigger for moments on end. You can practically see her counting his freckles with her eyes and it causes a pain somewhere inside of you. She sleeps better when he's here, leaning against his shoulder by the campfire and listening to him babble about history.

He snores and it keeps you up at night, his body across the room and tucked beside Wanherda.

When it is time for him to leave and go to the next village, Wanherda is somber again and Bellamy smiles at her, kissing one cheek softly.

He walks out the gate without turning back, horse's reigns clenched in one fist. They say no goodbyes and the gravedigger is out of sight soon. You shiver, snowflakes settling on top of your hair and melting a stream down your back. As always, the warriors let out relieved breaths, lung heaving with winter aches.

You stand with your mother for minutes, both silently looking at the open gate. She pulls her jacket tighter around her torso and retreats back into the surgery. There are no patients to care for today and you begin to tidy the place up, replacing supplies and neatening cots. Wanherda looks over inventory and chews at her fingernails.

You long to swat her hands away from her mouth, knowing she will tear her cuticles and rip off too much nail. It's a habit and a coping mechanism and you have grown tired of seeing her hands bleed during the afternoons and hearing a hiss anytime she presses too hard.

When you are done you sit on a cot, eyeing Wanherda. She stares at her own hands, passing a pebble back and forth between them instead of continuing to chew her fingers.

"You love him," you say. "The gravedigger. Why not tell him?"

"Maybe I will," Wanherda replies. "When the world no longer smells like war."

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><p>You spend the summer at Arkadia with Wanherda's mother and though the scenery is different, you still find yourself stitching cuts back together and dabbing alcohol on dirty wounds. Abby is a strong woman but the years have weakened her and you find yourself trailing after her to keep her from overworking. She and Wanherda have that in common.</p>

"How is Clarke?" Abby asks after you come back from visiting your mother for a few days.

"Missing Octavia," you tell her. The harbinger has sent letters and

gifts in her absence, but you can tell Wancheda looks for her in every rider that comes through the gate.

"I'd heard about her new baby, but she rarely comes home these days," Abby comments, twirling her long gray braid around a few fingers.

"The remaining delinquents are all like that, anyways. I shouldn't expect Octavia, of all people, to act any differently."

"Wancheda comes to Arkadia on campaigns." You furrow your brow, eyeing Abby's satirical expression.

"Clarke is slave to her duties. If not for her campaigns, I doubt she'd ever come back to Skaikru territory." Abby sighs, sinking into an old couch. You sit in silence, fiddling with the fabric of your armchair and taking sips from the water Abby offered.

Eventually, Marcus walks through the door of the living quarters and shucks his guard jacket. The old Chancellor sighs heavily before sending you a smile and coming to press a kiss to Abby's crown. She closes her eyes and hums, greeting her husband softly.

They talk amongst themselves for a moment before Kane retreats into the kitchen, creating a racket as he begins to cook a meal. Abby purses her lips in thought before following him, popping a few bones as she gets up from the couch.

They are a strange couple, both so silent and full of regretful memories, but you can see the love that they feel for each other.

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><p>"It's still too cold," Wancheda protests weakly as you gather up the last of your supplies, placing them neatly into traveling sacks. Your mother wrings her hands in worry as she watches you prepare for your first solitary campaign. "If you wait until Octavia's baby is stronger and they can make the journey here, we can leave together."</p>

"A campaign has been overdue for some time, Wancheda," you say for what feels like the seventh time that week. "I've been cooped up here for long enough and I want to go. The clans lack healers and if one of us can stay here and protect the dropship, the other can go out and help. When Octavia comes, you can choose to join me, if that's what you wish."

"At least let Bellamy go with you for the first leg of the journey." You shake your head and heave packs onto your horse's back, fastening them and securing the ties. The beast knickers softly and you pet its snout with a gloved hand.

Wancheda sighs and her breath crystalizes, misting you.

"I don't need the gravedigger hanging onto my heels, thank you very much."

You mount your horse and find yourself towering over Wancheda. Her eyes are glassy and too blue, pink cheeks and wrinkles framing them. She says nothing as you stare at one another, but there are many things that you read in her eyes.

"I'll be alright, mama," you tell her softly. "I'll be home in June and Octavia will come by summer."

"How many knives do you have packed?" She asks, voice catching.

"Twenty-six," you smile.

"Good."

You lean down so that she can kiss your face, warm palms cupping frosted cheeks. You feel a tear slip out and fall down onto her fingers and the both of you laugh awkwardly. She pulls back, still holding you, and looks into your eyes for a long minute. Eventually, Wanheda smiles and steps away, nodding as she wipes her nose.

She watches you go and you cannot count the number of times you find yourself looking back at the gate until it is out of sight.

End  
file.